

Uvalde students go back to school for 1st time since attack

PAUL J. WEBER, Associated Press

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AUSTIN, Texas (AP) — Gilbert Mata woke up excited Tuesday for the first day of school since a gunman's bullet tore through his leg three months ago in a fourth grade classroom in Uvalde.

The 10-year-old has healed from his physical wounds, but burning smells still remind him of gunfire and the sight of many police officers recalls the day in May that an assailant killed 19 of his classmates and two teachers.

On a morning that many Uvalde families had dreaded, a new school year began in the small South Texas town with big hugs on sidewalks, patrol cars parked at every corner and mothers wiping away tears while pulling away from the curb in the drop-off line.

Mata was ready to return, this time with his own cellphone. His mother, Corina Comacho, had a tougher time letting her child go back to class.

"There's a certain time he can get his phone out and text us he's OK," she said after walking him into a new school, Flores Elementary, and dropping him off behind doors with new locks. "That's like, 'OK, that's good. Now I feel better.'"

Outside Uvalde Elementary, teachers in matching turquoise shirts emblazoned with "Together We Rise & Together We Are Better" gently led students through a newly installed 8-foot (2.4-meter) fence and past a state trooper standing outside the front entrance.

"Good morning, sunshine!" greeted one teacher. "You ready to have a good school year?"

Robb Elementary, where the attack unfolded on May 24, is permanently closed and will eventually be demolished.

A large memorial of stuffed animals, victims' photographs and crosses remains outside the scene of one of the deadliest mass shootings in U.S. history.

Outside the other schools in Uvalde — which are only a short drive away — some added safety measures that the district rushed to implement after the attack were incomplete.

Security cameras are still in the works. New metal fencing surrounds some campuses, partially encloses others and isn't up at all at Flores Elementary, where many Robb students are enrolled this year.

The attack lasted more than 70 minutes before police finally confronted the gunman and killed him. The delay infuriated parents and led to a damning report by state lawmakers. Now more police are on patrol, but distrust is rampant.

“There's a big ol' gap right here. Anyone can walk through,” said Celeste Ibarra, 30, pointing to the new barrier around Uvalde Elementary while standing in her front yard across the street.

Ibarra's older daughter, 9-year-old Aubriella Melchor, was in Robb Elementary during the shooting and seemed to drag out Tuesday morning as long as possible, taking longer than usual to get dressed and poking at her breakfast. When back-to-school shopping rolled around, she didn't want to go to Walmart, and the glittery pencils Ibarra bought to get her daughter excited didn't work.

“She kind of just played with her cereal,” Ibarra said after dropping her off. “She was thinking. I know she was scared.”

Uvalde is off to a late start for school: Classes resumed weeks ago in many parts of Texas, where other districts encouraged students and teachers Tuesday to show support by wearing Uvalde's maroon colors. “We are all standing with you,” first lady Jill Biden tweeted.

Uvalde pushed back the first day of class after a summer of heartache, anger and revelations that nearly 400 officers who rushed to the scene waited so long to go inside the classroom.

Steve McCraw, the head of the Texas Department of Public Safety, called the response an “abject failure,” and the district fired school Police Chief Pete Arredondo last month after he was blamed for the slow law enforcement response.

As the new school year got underway, the DPS said Tuesday that five of its officers had been referred to the agency’s inspector general over their action during the shooting. The referrals are the result of an internal review, spokesman Travis Considine said. Two of the five have been suspended with pay pending the outcome of the inspector general's investigation.

The department had more than 90 troopers and officers at the scene of Robb Elementary, more than any other agency.

The agency also made public a letter McCraw sent in July, saying that DPS officers should treat anyone who opens fire at a school as an active shooter, not a “barricaded subject.”

“We will provide proper training and guidelines for recognizing and overcoming poor command decisions at an active shooter scene,” the letter said.

Over the summer, more than 100 students in Uvalde signed up for virtual learning. Others transferred to private schools. Elsa Avila, a fourth grade teacher who was shot in the abdomen and survived, missed the first day of school Tuesday for the first time in 30 years.

For Mata's family, virtual school wasn't really in the conversation: Gilbert didn't do well with online classes during the pandemic. And besides, he wanted to go to Flores Elementary with his friends, said his mother and Michael Martinez, his stepfather.

Mata is one of 11 survivors of the classroom whose families stay in touch, Comacho said. A ricocheted bullet went through his ankle and calf in Room 112.

The extra security measures have brought little comfort to Martinez, who tried to put off everything when it came to the first day. “I wasn't ready for him to go back to school, but he says he was,” Martinez said.

During an open house at Flores Elementary, Martinez said when he pressed a teacher about how the staff would protect students this time, the response was an unsatisfactory rundown about new locks.

“He didn't answer me what I really asked him. Like, how are you going to help? How are you going to save my kid if something happens?” Martinez said. “He didn't give me what I wanted to hear.”

Admittedly, Martinez said, he wasn't sure what he wanted to hear. He just knows he wasn't reassured.

“I just wanted to hear something to make my mind change,” he said.

In the shadow of tragedy, Uvalde public schools welcome students back today

[Claire Bryan](#), [Sig Christenson](#), Staff writers

Sep. 6, 2022Updated: Sep. 6, 2022 6:26 p.m.

UVALDE — Public schools here reopened Tuesday with enthusiastic teachers, jittery parents and a strong law enforcement presence, exactly 15 Tuesdays after the mass shooting that claimed 21 lives at Robb Elementary School.

The newly created Uvalde Elementary was ringed by Texas Department of Public Safety troopers, a Uvalde police officer, a county constable — and by eight TV camera crews — well before families started arriving with Robb's displaced third and fourth graders.

In the dim light and thick humidity of early morning, cars began dropping off kids at 7 a.m. Teachers wearing teal T-shirts and lanyards greeted them with a hearty, “Good morning! How are you?” and “Welcome back!”

The teachers clapped. Some embraced students in big hugs as they left their parents' sides.

Sandra Chavez, 32, led her two children onto the Flores Middle School grounds and toured the campus. Asked if she was comfortable with her children in school, she said, "It was their choice."

A long line of cars crept forward as staffers opened doors and gave words of encouragement. At least two state troopers were on hand to help as the sun rose and a rooster crowed relentlessly from a nearby house.

At most campuses, the families entered gates in new 8-foot-high fences, designed to be impossible to climb, past signs that warned, "NO MEDIA." In the coming school year, the school district plans to supplement its five police officers with 33 DPS troopers and has hired safety monitors to check door and window locks.

The fence wasn't up yet at Flores Middle, but by the afternoon, crews had made substantial progress on it.

"They've been screwing around all summer and just yesterday tore down the old fence," said Wyatt Heard, 81, who sat in his driveway to watch the morning procession roll by, a longtime back-to-school tradition for the Vietnam veteran.

Heard believed the security was pointless, predicting that "within a week or two this will be back to normal. I wish it wouldn't be that way."

On ExpressNews.com: With school about to start, Uvalde safety fixes aren't done

At Uvalde Elementary, two men were still working to complete the fence at the rear of the campus.

The Uvalde Consolidated Independent School District pushed back the start of its 2022-23 school year by three weeks to allow for security upgrades, but not all of them will be finished in time, angering some parents.

District leaders have acknowledged they have a trust problem. Worries about safety prompted some parents to enroll their students in other school districts. Every family at Uvalde CISD had the option to enroll children in an online academy to learn at home, but only 136 students have signed up for it.

That suggests most of the district's students were back in classrooms Tuesday. Enrollment was 4,116 last year.

"I had a lot of anxiety last night," said Kelsie Paradeaux, who dropped her son off at Uvalde Elementary, a third-grader who had been at Robb during the shooting.

"I don't really have an option. I'm planning on going back to work, so virtual wasn't an option. I'm just praying that they are going to do everything that they promised. I'm a little worried because the fence isn't built all the way," she said.

Her other son is in 5th grade and attending Flores Middle. Its lack of any fence at all also worries her.

"He's excited," Paradeaux said of her third-grader. "He said he's a little bit scared, but he's reassured because I live right here ... He's ready to go see his friends. I don't think he is as scared as when it first happened but it is still there."

"Last night he was tossing and turning so I don't know if he was taking it out that way."

Kimberley Rubio, who lost her daughter Alexandria "Lexi" Rubio on May 24, is sending her other kids to school today. Even as late as Monday afternoon, she had not let herself think about the "goodbye" moment yet.

"I've just kind of closed it off, but I imagine it is going to be extremely difficult," Rubio said.

She hadn't had many conversations with her kids about the first day of school, either, but "I have kind of taken their lead," Rubio said.

“My older ones have discussed what they are wearing that day. A lot of people are going to be wearing Uvalde Strong in support, so I think they are going to be wearing their Lexi shirts. Taking her with them on their new school year.”

“We won’t be taking first day of school photos,” Rubio added. “That is too hard, to see her missing. So, no photos.”

In San Antonio schools and across Texas, students wore maroon Tuesday to honor Uvalde’s victims.

Nikki Cross, who lost her nephew Uziyah Garcia, 10, in the shooting, was prepared to put her kids in school but balked at the last minute.

“We tried this morning, but we just couldn’t do it,” she said, stopping by Starbucks. “I just picked my high schoolers up.”

She plans to homeschool her younger children. It was unclear what her high schoolers would do.

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Administrators emphasized the need for “structure and routine” for returning students attending classes in the shadow of the second-worst school shooting in U.S. history, and the deadliest ever in Texas.

To that end, it announced that schools were off limits to an expected large news media presence, and asked reporters and photographers to work from “adjacent” properties and not to obstruct campus parking.

The district declined interview requests in advance, “to allow district personnel to focus on preparing for the return to school,” but encouraged the community and media to check for updates on its back to school web page.

Balerie Muñoz, 17, was at Uvalde High School’s emotional opening home football game Friday night and said concerns about school security are constantly in the background.

“I’m excited for my senior year but with the shooting, I don’t know if the school upgraded safety,” Muñoz said. “I just hope we have better cops. Last year we had a lot of bomb threats. It’s scary. I’m excited but I am worried.”

Kalum Saiz, 13, a seventh-grader, was hanging out with friends under the awning outside the Terry Rambie Tennis Complex at the high school Tuesday morning.

“They’re not really worried about the first day,” and the fence will make him feel safer when it’s finally built, but students are still bothered by the shooting, he said.

“The kids and the teachers didn’t deserve that,” Saiz said. “It was just another school day near the end. It just shouldn’t have happened at all.”

At an Aug. 29 town hall, district superintendent Hal Harrell said that 90 percent of the fencing was up, but that reinforcement of entrances and vestibules, and installation of security cameras was behind schedule because of supply-chain problems.

The May 24 massacre made Uvalde the latest symbol of the nation’s vulnerability to armed assaults on schools. An 18-year-old gunman, using a semi-automatic rifle he purchased legally from an online retailer, entered the school through an unlocked door and killed 19 children and two teachers huddled in a pair of interconnected classrooms.

The tragedy was compounded by a bungled law enforcement response. Officers of the school district force, the Uvalde Police Department, DPS and other agencies waited more than hour before storming the classrooms and killing the gunman. During the long wait, children repeatedly called 911 from the classrooms, begging to be rescued.

DPS director Steve McCraw called it an “abject failure” and faulted Pedro “Pete” Arredondo, then chief of the Uvalde CISD police force, who McCraw said was the on-scene incident commander.

The Uvalde school board fired Arredondo on Aug. 24.

A Texas House committee that investigated the shooting said Arredondo was not the only law enforcement commander on the scene who could be blamed, and added, "With hindsight, we can say that Robb Elementary did not adequately prepare for the risk of an armed intruder on campus."

The school's 5-foot fence "was inadequate to meaningfully impede an intruder," the committee found.

Robb Elementary is slated to be demolished and replaced.

Julissa Garcia-Talavera, a teacher at a Catholic school, Sacred Heart Uvalde, has two children attending Uvalde High School. After watching how the UCISD board responded to parents who lost children in the tragedy, she is skeptical about the district's ability to respond to other kinds of issues.

"Who am I to go and talk about (my daughter) maybe getting approached by drugs or maybe a bullying problem?" she said before Friday's game. "Really? What do I now think (the district is) really going to do about something like that?"

Garcia-Talavera does hope that more trust will be built between school leaders and families as the school year starts and relationships have a chance to get better.

Mayor Don McLaughlin Jr. began driving past Uvalde's schools at 6:15 a.m. to see for himself how things were going. Aside from the media presence slowing traffic in places, it wasn't much different from other years, he said.

"I saw lots of people, lots of cars, lots of press," McLaughlin said. "I also saw a lot of kids standing out on the corner waiting for a bus without parents. But, I mean, that's part of life, that's the way they've always done it in Uvalde."

Photos from Uvalde: How a grief-stricken community prepared to send its children back to school

Today, students in Uvalde return to classrooms for the first day of school, just 15 weeks after the deadliest school shooting in Texas history.

THE TEXAS TRIBUNE

BY [EVAN L'ROY](#) SEPT. 6, 2022 5 AM CENTRAL

When students return to school in Uvalde today, just 15 weeks after the deadliest school shooting in Texas history, 19 students and two teachers will not be present.

In just more than three months since the massacre, residents have sought to help children return to normalcy with familiar back-to-school rituals, tinged by grief.

In August, one family from Lockhart donated nearly 800 backpacks to students. The next day, an annual wellness fair at the Uvalde civic center included a booth with information on how to care for children and parents' mental and physical health. Later that evening, people danced and enjoyed live music outside the town courthouse during a summer sendoff block party hosted by local businesses.

Meanwhile, families have questioned whether [safety plans](#) for the new school year are enough, and some have been forced to make [hard decisions](#) about whether or not to send their children back at all.

Parents, like Brianna Gonzales, are keeping their kids in the Uvalde Consolidated Independent School District. Others, like Adam Martinez, whose 8-year-old son Zayon was present at Robb Elementary on the day of the shooting, will be sending their children to online classes, instead.

Students from Robb Elementary will be [relocated](#) to two other schools, and all schools in Uvalde implemented new security measures before the first day of class. Dalton Elementary added an 8-foot fence around the campus perimeter. Sacred Heart Parish School, which began classes two weeks ago, upgraded its security to include new cameras and polycarbonate bullet-resistant sheeting hidden behind colorful paper signs on outside windows.

Uvalde residents question the school district's new safety plans for first school year since mass shooting

Uvalde trustees are unsure if officers who will provide school security this year were part of the delayed response to the shooting at Robb Elementary.

THE TEXAS TRIBUNE

BY [JESUS VIDALES](#) AUG. 29, 2022 9 PM CENTRAL

The Uvalde school board at a Monday town hall discussed fixing crucial security issues exposed during the May 24 mass shooting at Robb Elementary that left 21 people dead. But every resident who spoke said their plans were still not enough — and many had questions about whether some of the new security measures would be stained with the legacy of failures that contributed to Texas' deadliest school shooting and the delayed law enforcement response to it.

A [Texas House committee's investigation](#) of the shooting found “systemic failures and egregious poor decision making” by [nearly everyone involved](#) who was in a position of power. The House committee's report painted a damning portrayal of a school district that didn't strictly adhere to its safety plan and a police response that disregarded its own active-shooter training.

Security plans for the new academic year, which begins Sept. 6 for Uvalde schools, call for 33 Texas Department of Public Safety officers to monitor campuses across the district. But Uvalde Consolidated Independent School District trustees couldn't answer residents' questions about whether any of those officers were among the 91 DPS officers who responded to Robb on May 24.

Diana Oveldo-Karau, a lifelong Uvalde resident, told trustees that some of those officers could be ones who were among those that waited more than an hour to confront the gunman.

“And I continue to just not understand how the school board and administration can believe that just because you have those DPS members on site ... expect us to believe that our children will be safe,” Oveldo-Karau said. “Those are the people who failed us.”

Superintendent Hal Harrell said he would discuss the issue with a DPS lieutenant on Wednesday.

More than 350 law enforcement officers from several local, state and federal agencies responded to the shooting but took more than an hour to confront the gunman. Law enforcement doctrine dictates that officers immediately confront active shooters.

The Uvalde school board last week [fired former schools police Chief Pete Arredondo](#), who was broadly criticized for the delayed response. Arredondo was listed in the district's active-shooter plan as the commanding officer of such an event, but the consensus of those interviewed by the House committee was that Arredondo did not assume that role and no one else took over for him. Arredondo's lawyer has argued that his client should not have been assigned as the incident commander.

But Uvalde residents have [pushed for officers from other agencies to also face repercussions](#) for what's widely viewed as a catastrophically fumbled response. The House committee report said that better-equipped departments should have stepped up to fill a leadership void after Arredondo failed to take charge.

Also discussed Monday were plans to use \$15,000 in grant funding to do Wi-Fi audits. The House committee's investigation also found that the district's emergency management alert system isn't always effective. It operates by sending out warnings online to teachers and faculty, many of whom access it through a smartphone app.

On May 24, not all Robb teachers received the alert about the gunman immediately, in part because of a poor wireless internet signal that made it difficult to send out the alert and the fact that many teachers didn't have their phones or had them off at the moment they received it.

Harrell also said the district plans to upgrade door locks, add more fencing and increase the number of cameras in school buildings. Multiple witnesses told the House committee that Robb employees often left doors unlocked, while teachers would prop open doors. This was partly because of a shortage of keys. In March, the teacher in Room 111, through which investigators believe the shooter entered during the massacre, reported to school administrators that his classroom door "was not always locking."

Despite all the new safety measures discussed Monday, mothers in the district like Laura Garza remain skeptical.

“I understand what you’re saying about doors being locked, but there are kids at the high school walking the hallways at all times,” Garza said. “Those are things that need to be looked into, not just a physical change, not just gates, but the actual school system in itself.”

After the Robb Elementary shooting, some Uvalde parents are choosing private or online education

Following a state report showing that almost 400 law enforcement officers showed up at the school on May 24, some Uvalde parents are doubtful over whether their kids will be safe in the district.

THE TEXAS TRIBUNE

BY [BRIAN LOPEZ](#) AUG. 15, 2022 5 AM CENTRAL

UVALDE — Brianna Gonzales, fresh off her nursing shift, sat quietly alongside her two sons in Uvalde High School’s auditorium this past week as school district officials laid out for parents new safety measures for the upcoming school year.

Gonzales has decided to keep her two sons, a kindergartner and a fifth grader, in the district. But it wasn’t the easiest decision. Her oldest was at Robb Elementary on May 24, the day an armed teenager entered the school and killed two teachers and 19 children. Fortunately, she had taken her son home before the shooter entered the building.

But a summer of conflicting government narratives has set Uvalde parents on edge, particularly after a [state report showed](#) that 376 law enforcement officers showed up at Robb on May 24 but did not engage the shooter for more than an hour.

Parents are now trying to plan for the back-to-school season and facing tough choices over their children’s education and safety. Some are keeping their kids in the Uvalde Consolidated Independent School District when school starts on Sept. 6. Some are choosing homeschooling and others are looking at private schools.

“I just didn’t see what the point of going to another district would do for me,” Gonzales said. “If it could happen here, it could happen there.”

Gonzales, like other parents in this working-class community, doesn't have the time or money to look for other options right now. She has a full-time job and she's usually up earlier to get herself and her kids ready for the day. Their dad works out of town and is usually home only during the weekends, she said. That rules out trying to get her kids to nearby districts or pay for private school or even consider online school.

"COVID affected them a lot and I saw how that affected their education and I don't want them to have to go to virtual again," she said. "I don't have the time of day to do things with them for school so I feel like I would be failing them on that part of their education."

At least in Uvalde, she said, the district is working toward making the school more secure as the first day approaches.

In the high school auditorium, the Uvalde schools superintendent, Hal Harrell, laid out for parents and students the district's plans to make schools here secure as well as offer more access to mental health resources. He discussed the district's partnership with [Texas Child Health Access Through Telemedicine](#), also known as TCHAT, which helps identify behavioral health needs of children and adolescents.

The district is also contracting [Rhithm](#), a company with an app that allows staff and students to log how they are feeling. [Communities in Schools](#), a nonprofit organization focused on connecting students with resources, is also sending teams to the district to provide additional behavioral health support to students.

The district is upgrading security on its seven campuses. Fencing is being installed at some schools. But Harrell couldn't promise that Uvalde High School would be secure with fencing before the first day because of the sheer size and openness of that campus.

There will be 33 Texas Department of Public Safety officers deployed across the Uvalde school district throughout the school year. The district is also accepting applications for campus monitors, who would check locks on doors and gates and provide reports to the administration. Some 500 cameras will be installed at campuses before the first day of school.

The district has spent about \$4.5 million so far in security upgrades, with some of the money coming from donations and grants.

Uvalde CISD will offer an [online option](#) for students who want to stay in the district but not attend in-person classroom instruction. Students who opt for online instruction will receive brand-new iPads, Harrell said.

The Texas Education Agency is in the process of approving Uvalde's virtual school and making sure it complies with [Senate Bill 15](#), the virtual education bill that passed during last year's second special session.

The bill also caps the number of students in the district that can be enrolled in a district's online alternative. The school district will need a waiver from TEA if more than 10% of all enrolled students want to be in the online school.

But for Gonzales, Uvalde's new security plans seem to satisfy her, and her children will return to the district's in-person classes.

"[Uvalde is] implementing new security features, having the troopers there — that brings another sense of added security," she said.

Gonzales made the decision two weeks ago to send her kids back to Uvalde CISD. It's something that parents here don't usually question in this small town of 15,000, about 85 miles west of San Antonio, she said.

As a lifelong Uvalde resident, Gonzales wanted her children to have the same experience she did attending district schools. She also wants her children to regain a sense of normalcy after two years of school disruption from the pandemic.

But as a result of the shooting, Gonzales still has a sense of fear and concern as the first day approaches. She bought her oldest son, who is 10, a cellphone. She hadn't planned to get him a phone until he was 13. She also plans to buy them bulletproof backpacks, which she sees as an investment.

"Last year it was just 'I have to buy school clothes' and that was it," she said. "This year is completely different."

Adam Martinez, the father of two students, will send his kids to the online school that Uvalde is offering. It wasn't his first choice but as he spoke with his kids, it was obvious they were still scared.

"I was telling my son, 'there's gonna be a tall fence, and they're gonna have state troopers on all the locations,'" Martinez said. "And he told me, 'Who cares if there's cops? They're not going to do anything anyway, they're scared.'"

Others, though, still have not regained the trust of the school district. Angeli Gomez, a parent who had two children at Robb the day of the shooting, was handcuffed that day trying to get answers from law enforcement about her children.

Now, she and 19 other women have been in touch with a woman in San Marcos who has offered to homeschool their children for free.

Uvalde's mayor has said Robb Elementary will be demolished and another school will be built in its place. But until that happens, no student will have to return to the school. Instead, students will be spread out to different Uvalde CISD campuses.

One of those is Flores Elementary. Gomez doesn't think it's a good idea to transfer the children from Robb there.

"They're trying to stuff our kids — third, fourth, fifth and sixth [grade] — in Flores, since they want to demolish Robb, but Flores won't fit our kids," she said. "We're gonna have, what, 33 kids in a class? They're not gonna pay attention or learn."

Jeremy Newman, deputy director of the Texas Home School Coalition, advised that parents considering withdrawing their kids from the public school system in favor of homeschooling don't need to recreate what a public school does.

"People feel like they have to be a master in all academic subjects," Newman said. "The parent's job is not as much to transfer knowledge from their head to the students' head as it is for them to provide a learning environment where the student wants to learn."

For people who haven't been in charge of homeschooling their child, it can be an overwhelming task to find the right resources for their child. Newman suggests they contact [his group](#), which helps families who have always homeschooled or those who are just starting out.

The number of families homeschooling at least one child has tripled in Texas since the start of the pandemic, Newman said. According to Texas Education Agency data, nearly 30,000 students between grades 7-12 withdrew from Texas public schools to homeschool in the 2020-2021 school semester, a 40% increase over the prior year.

Topping the reasons people are choosing homeschooling are safety and academics, he said.

Still other Uvalde parents will send their children to Sacred Heart Catholic School, one of three private schools in the city. Principal Joseph Olan said interest in his school has increased from previous years. During the last school year, he had about 55 students enrolled. This year, that number has ballooned to 120, and he expects it to grow as the school year goes on.

The school has received donations to put up a fence around the campus, bulletproof the windows and door and install a new security camera system.

“These are the primary reasons why families are coming,” Olan said.

It’s not clear how many students Uvalde CISD will be losing this next school year. In Texas, schools are funded based on the number of students enrolled and the daily attendance on campus. [Schools receive](#) a base allotment of \$6,160 per student each year. Any dip in enrollment means less money for the school district.

Diana Olvedo-Karau, who works in the school district’s transportation department, said homeschooling in Uvalde has not been common. But more people are talking about it now.

Olvedo-Karau is concerned over the funding the district will lose if children are pulled out, but she understands why parents might do it.

Uvalde school officials did not immediately respond to The Texas Tribune’s request for enrollment numbers for this upcoming school year.

Uvalde parent Tina Quintanilla, 41, plans to use a private online school company, [K12](#), for her daughter’s instruction this next year. She also has a son who requires special education classes, and she still hasn’t found a school for him. Quintanilla is a graduate of Uvalde High School, home of the “Fighting Coyotes & Lobos,” so the decision to look at alternatives wasn’t easy.

“It’s heart-wrenching because we’re coyote pride here,” she said, referring to the high school’s mascot. “We’re loyal and true.”

Uvalde parents take months of protest to school district’s doorway

[Claire Bryan](#), Staff writer

Sep. 28, 2022Updated: Sep. 29, 2022 10:58 a.m.

UVALDE — Brett Cross got two hours' sleep, tossing and turning on a cot next to the back door of the Uvalde Consolidated Independent School District's main building but kept mostly awake by the beeping of its alarm system, trucks rumbling on North Getty Street and crickets.

Before the sun was up Wednesday, his wife, Nikki Cross, and a handful of other parents and family members who lost children in the May 24 shooting at Robb Elementary School rejoined him to continue a protest that began the previous morning.

As they have for months, the group demanded that the district suspend all of its police officers and begin its own investigation into their response to the killing of 19 children and two teachers .

The district released a statement late in the afternoon saying it "has engaged with JPPI Investigations to conduct an independent review of the Uvalde CISD Police Department's actions on May 24, 2022."

It was unclear when the district took that step. Superintendent Hal Harrell had mentioned it as a possibility weeks before the protest, which went into its second day with a large black speaker propped up near the door blasting an audio collage of 11 of the children's voices created by Jazmin Cazares, who lost her sister Jacklyn in the shooting.

On Thursday, after spending a second night at the door, Brett Cross was invited into the office of the school superintendent for a tense and inconclusive meeting and vowed to continue the protest.

The district fired its police chief on Aug. 24 after public pressure that began days after the Robb massacre, but had deferred to a state investigation of its officers and those of several other police agencies, whose tactical leaders were roundly condemned for waiting more than an hour to confront and kill the shooter.

"I'm probably going to jail today," Nikki Cross said Wednesday morning as protesters sat in lawn chairs and school district officials walked from their cars into the building without acknowledging them.

On Facebook, Brett Cross shared a video of Kenneth Mueller, the district's director of student services, trying to get past him to enter the building early Tuesday. The video shows Mueller placing his arms against Cross at one point. "Do not put your hands on me," Cross said, and Mueller backed away.

There's also a clip of Harrell arriving and approaching the door, accompanied by Texas Department of Public Safety troopers and other administrators, at whom Cross started yelling.

"I don't get to hug him! I don't get to hear him say that he loves me!" Cross shouted, referring to the nephew killed at Robb who he had raised like a son. "And you still allow these people who listened to our children die work here. You are allowing that."

"I have given you 18 weeks and you still have not done a damn thing," Cross said.

State troopers escorted some administrators to their cars at 12:30 p.m Tuesday. They didn't engage with the protesters. Cross decided to keep the protest going overnight, then spent a second night at the door.

He and hundreds of parents and community members had attended school board meetings throughout the summer, demanding more accountability.

At a board meeting on Aug. 29, the district announced it would audit and evaluate its police department, a "management and organizational review" to be conducted by the Texas Police Chiefs Association starting Thursday.

"I don't really know what audit means," Nikki Cross said Wednesday. "That is definitely not what we are asking for."

Brett Cross said the evaluation is to improve the police force moving forward, but isn't about investigating its response on May 24.

By the lunch hour, officials had moved reporters out of the building's rear parking lot, to a point where they could not see the protesters. Hours later, it announced the review by the Austin-area private investigation firm.

“Regarding the current status of UCISD officers, as always, the district will not comment on personnel matters,” the statement said. “While we will continue attempts to meet with individuals to address their concerns, our focus remains on supporting our students, staff, and families throughout the recovery process.”

On Thursday morning, Harrell invited Brett Cross into the building, declining efforts by Cross to hold the meeting outside.

“I’m happy to meet with you individually,” Harrell said in a 10-minute interaction that Cross live-streamed on Twitter.

In his office, Harrell said the district can’t suspend its five campus police officers.

“We are doing the investigation but I need those officers just like the city needs their officers, just like the sheriff’s department needs their officers,” Harrell said.

“For what?” Cross said. “You sent them home on Tuesday, right? Didn’t you do just fine? You have 33 DPS on scene.”

The UCISD officers are still needed for duties “different than what DPS is willing to do at this point,” Harrell said.

Cross insisted that school police should have been suspended the day after the shooting. The two went back and forth, with Harrell admitting that there were failures on May 24. Cross wasn’t satisfied.

“My son is dead because of the inactions of your school district, of the city, of all the police involved, starting with the school, to the city to the state, they all failed. They all failed,” Cross said.

“And I’m very sorry,” Harrell said.

“If you are sorry then do something,” Cross said.

“Brett, I’m very sorry, I really am,” Harrell said.

Cross left the building telling his online audience Harrell didn't care, using an expletive and adding, "so we will still be here."

'This shouldn't be my life:' Day and night protest outside Uvalde school district HQ enters second week

[Claire Bryan, Staff writer](#)

Oct. 4, 2022 Updated: Oct. 4, 2022 6:43 p.m.

UVALDE — The protesters camped outside the Uvalde Consolidated Independent School District headquarters began their second week Tuesday with no agreement to their demands and the same question as when they started: Will it end with arrests or be an endurance contest?

At the vigil's center is Brett Cross, a prominent critic of the police response to the May 24 massacre of 19 students and two teachers at Robb Elementary School who lost a nephew in the attack. Cross raised 10-year-old Uziyah Garcia and considered him a son.

On Sept. 27, after months berating the district and calling on it to suspend its police officers and investigate their performance during the shooting, he and a few supporters brought some lawn chairs, a couple of cases of bottled water and a cot to the employee entrance used by the superintendent and other school officials.

By the weekend, the camp had acquired two blue pop-up awnings, a tent, tables and coolers full of donated food. Other families who lost children in the shooting have spent hours by his side, but Cross is the one who has gone without any trips home to change clothes or sleep in his own bed.

Cross also had no appropriate place to go to the bathroom, though late Sunday he celebrated on Twitter the apparent arrival of a toilet to the campsite. It isn't visible to passersby. Someone tried to provide a construction-site-quality portable toilet last week but the school district ordered it removed.

The group's interactions with employees arriving and exiting the building were tense at the outset, and news media were soon ordered to keep to the other end of the parking lot. Things settled into a routine, but late last week the district acknowledged the "challenges" posed by the protesters in a letter to staff and families and suggested that it was preparing to remove them.

UCISD officials were working to "identify state or local partners who are willing to assist in restoring peace," the letter stated. The district also installed a gate for cars to access the parking lot, which the letter said was part of previously planned security upgrades. The district keeps the gate locked and their administrators are parking in a lot next door.

At the end of the vigil's second day, the school district announced it had hired JPPI Investigations, based near Austin, to review the conduct of its five campus officers, but Superintendent Hal Harrell told Cross in a 10-minute meeting Thursday that he can't do without the officers and a mass suspension was unrealistic.

For school security, the force has been augmented by 33 Texas Department of Public Safety troopers.

Over the weekend, Cross met with Beth Reavis, the UCISD assistant superintendent of human resources. After the meeting, he tweeted, "Our demand was reiterated. We demand the school officers that were there in the school on May 24th be put on suspension until the end of an investigation. As of right now, we are still at an impasse."

Cross has documented the entire protest on Twitter, including live-streamed videos, in which he states he will not quit until the officers are suspended.

On Tuesday, he sat with his wife, Nikki Cross, under one of the awnings, eating a McDonald's Happy Meal and talking with Jennifer Lugo and Steven Garcia, who

lost their daughter Ellie in the shooting. Cross regularly excused himself to take calls from news media, pacing back and forth in the shade of nearby trees.

“Ugh, no,” he said when asked if he ever thought he would be out there for a week. “I didn’t think I would be out here, period, especially before May 24. This shouldn’t be my life right now, but it is and that’s it.”

Nikki Cross has spent the week making regular trips home to check on her kids, whom she had decided to keep away from the protest site because of the uncertainties of a possible police action.

“At first it was OK, the kids they understood,” she said. “But it is just getting harder and harder every day. Especially, my son and him are best friends, he’s like, ‘I want my dad here, when is dad going to be home?’”

Brett and Nikki Cross asked for another meeting with the administration on Monday but hadn’t heard back.

Nikki Cross created a memorial out of 21 clear backpacks covered in stickers, one for each victim, and set them outside the front door of the administration building. Inside the backpacks are everyday items the students and teachers might have used: pencils, notebooks, water bottles and snacks.

“I don’t want (the administration) to forget,” Nikki Cross said

Uvalde school district fires new officer under investigation for Robb Elementary shooting response

Guillermo Contreras, San Antonio Express-News

Oct. 6, 2022 Updated: Oct. 6, 2022 1:04 p.m.

A new Uvalde school officer was fired Thursday just hours after media outlets reported that she was under investigation for her role in the disastrous police response to the Robb Elementary mass shooting.

In announcing the dismissal of officer Crimson Hux Elizondo, the Uvalde school district also cited a comment she made the day of the massacre: “If my son had been in there, I would not have been outside. I promise you that.”

Elizondo was talking with other officers on the scene. Her words were captured on police body-camera video.

“We sincerely apologize to the victims’ families and the greater Uvalde community for the pain that this revelation has caused,” the district said in a written statement. “Ms. Elizondo’s statement in the audio is not consistent with the District’s expectations. Effective today (October 6), Crimson Elizondo has been terminated from her position with the Uvalde CISD.”

Elizondo was one of seven DPS agents referred on July 25 to the Office of Inspector General for what DPS officials said in an internal memo were “actions which may be inconsistent with training (and) department requirements.” Two of the officers were suspended; Elizondo, however, wasn’t one of them.

The department has never publicly identified any of the officers by name, but the Express-News obtained their names from other correspondence and verified the information with law enforcement and other sources.

Elizondo, a junior DPS officer at the time of the May 24 shooting, is seen on police body-camera footage without body armor or a rifle early in the massacre. She stayed mostly outside the school building where gunman Salvador Ramos — 18, of Uvalde — killed 19 children and two teachers with an assault-style rifle.

Elizondo and other Uvalde-area officers entered the hallway at 11:42 a.m., about 12 minutes after the gunman entered the building. However, none of them went after the shooter.

Elizondo's mother told the Express-News last week that she would pass a message to her daughter and let her decide whether to comment on the matter. Elizondo didn't contact the Express-News.

CNN reported that other body-camera footage showed her riding a bus to the Uvalde hospital with some of the children from Robb Elementary, and saying when the bus headed back to the school: "Nothing could prepare you for what they brought out. It was horrible."

Parents and elected officials were outraged Thursday by her comment — and her hiring by the Uvalde Consolidated Independent School District.

Kimberly Garcia, whose 10-year-old daughter, Amerie Jo, was killed in the mass shooting, vented her anger on Twitter.

"It wasn't your baby, right? That's why you didn't go in 'Officer Elizondo'?" Garcia tweeted. "She was there WITHIN MINUTES? But her child wasn't in there so it didn't matter. MY child WAS IN THERE! My child was SCARED! She was in danger!"

State Sen. Roland Gutierrez, a San Antonio Democrat who represents Uvalde, also angrily weighed in.

"People's children died because DPS officials failed to do their job," Gutierrez said in statement Thursday. "This isn't just the failure of one law enforcement officer, it is the failure of the Texas government and the buck stops with Governor Greg Abbott."

"DPS and whoever allowed this officer to be put on the payroll and stationed in our schools just slapped this community in the face," Gutierrez said.

'Honorably discharged'

Elizondo joined DPS in June 2018 and resigned before agency officials announced they had referred the seven officers to internal affairs, according to DPS and Texas Commission on Law Enforcement records reviewed by the Express-News.

Sources said she had applied to the school district before the internal investigation began.

Elizondo was “honorably discharged” from DPS, according to one of the documents.

It was not clear if the district was notified during the hiring process that DPS had placed Elizondo under internal investigation.

TCOLE records show she joined the district on Aug. 30, and the district’s website shows her photo and identifies her as one of its newest officers.

Several victims’ families and friends have been protesting outside the UCISD administration building for more than a week. The group has called for the suspension of all seven school district officers who responded to the massacre, pending an independent investigation.

Uvalde school district suspends all police department operations

[Claire Bryan](#), [Sig Christenson](#), Staff writers

Oct. 7, 2022 Updated: Oct. 7, 2022 5:11 p.m.

The Uvalde school district said it suspended the operations of its entire police department and removed two top administrators Friday morning.

The district’s superintendent, Hal Harrell, said in a memo to staff that the school board would discuss his retirement in closed session when it meets Monday, with no set timeline for a transition to a new leader.

The announcements came after parents had protested outside the district’s administration building for 11 days to demand the suspension of all school officers who were involved in the disastrous law enforcement response to the mass shooting at Robb Elementary School on May 24.

They prompted protest leaders Brett and Nikki Cross to pack up their camp. They lost their nephew Uziyah, a 10-year-old they had raised as a son, in the shooting.

“We are relieved to be going home now, very emotional,” Nikki Cross wrote in a text message. Brett Cross noted in a tweet that the end of the protest came at its 245th hour, adding, “We did it!”

It was the second day in a row that the Uvalde Consolidated Independent School District had announced personnel changes that elated its critics, though the district said on both days that it based the decisions on new information as it arrived — not in response to the cluster of parents assembled since Sept. 27 at the back door of its main office.

On Thursday, the district fired one of its new school police officers hours after media outlets reported that it had hired her in August knowing that the Texas Department of Public Safety was investigating her performance as a state trooper, though it was unclear if the district knew the probe was related to her role at Robb Elementary on the day of the shooting.

Crimson Hux Elizondo had been in the hallway with other officers at Robb and was heard on publicly released police body camera video telling them, “If my son had been in there, I would not have been outside. I promise you that.” The reports, first aired by CNN, drew a fresh crowd of angry residents to join the small protest campsite outside UCISD headquarters.

A statement released Friday suggested the trooper’s hiring and firing had produced much wider fallout. It said campus officers temporarily will do other jobs and that the district suspended its police chief, Lt. Miguel Hernandez, and Ken Mueller, its director of student services, because of “recent developments” that “uncovered additional concerns with department operations.” Both were placed on paid leave. The statement said Hernandez was to be replaced as chief and that Mueller opted to retire.

“The District remains committed to resolving issues with verifiable evidence” and had been waiting for an investigation by a private firm and a review of department operations by the Texas Police Chiefs Association before making decisions, the statement said. The results of the review now “will guide the rebuilding of the department and the hiring of a new Chief of Police.”

Evadula Orta, the mother of Rojelio Torres, 10, who was killed in the Robb shooting, said she and other family members of the victims were relieved by the school district's decision.

"I just know we're here excited that it happened like that, that there's no officers in the schools anymore," said Orta, 30. "Right now, that's a good thing for us."

DPS has 33 troopers providing security at the district's schools, and the district had approved hiring new officers for its own force. On Friday, the district said it asked the agency to provide additional troopers for campus and extracurricular activities. Cross had called for the suspension of the five campus officers who had been at Robb on May. 24.

Asked what she expected of the school district, Orta said, "Mainly, I wanted them to tell us in person what's going on, but we're not going to get that. They just emailed me that, and that was it. They didn't show their face to us or anything."

While some school district workers had entered the central office Friday, neither Harrell nor other leaders they wished to speak to had come to the building.

"We just want the kids to be safe." Orta said. "And that's all we wanted, to get those officers out, the ones that were there that worked for the school district."

One Uvalde activist, Jesse Rizo, said Harrell's possible retirement from the school district and the other changes were "part of the accountability process."

"It's a somber moment," he said. "It's challenging because Dr. Harrell is a very well-liked man. He's been in Uvalde a long time. But I think it's a step in the right direction, a step towards the healing process."

Activist Diana Olvedo-Karau, who decided to run for a seat on the Uvalde County Commissioners Court because of local reaction to the shooting, called the school district's decision "an amazing victory."

"It's a victory because it took people working together to make it happen," she said. "The parents that recognized the DPS officer, the media person that took that information and dug for proof for information to be able to show what the

school actually did, and then combining that with what Brett and Nikki Cross did. ... All of it together was so powerful that the school district had no choice but to do what it did.”

Some parents insisted their fight wasn’t over.

“It is what we wanted, and I’m glad they finally did the right thing, but I just don’t see why it needed to come to this,” said Kimberly Rubio, who lost her daughter Lexi on May 24. “We shouldn’t have had CNN tell us about the officer. The district should have been upfront about it, and they shouldn’t have hired her.”

“I just want people to know this isn’t it,” Rubio said. “This is just one step. We are still demanding accountability and transparency in regards to the Uvalde city police and DPS.”

A hard fall: Pete Arredondo, fired Uvalde school police chief, is exile in hometown after Robb Elementary tragedy

[Sig Christenson](#), Staff writer

Oct. 14, 2022Updated: Oct. 15, 2022 7:19 a.m.

UVALDE — UVALDE — It had been another convulsive day for Uvalde’s school district and the community.

On Oct. 6, district officials fired a newly hired school police officer, Crimson Hux Elizondo, after news outlets reported that her previous employer, the Texas Department of Public Safety, was investigating her for her role in the failed law enforcement response to the May 24 massacre at Robb Elementary School.

Late that same afternoon, Pedro “Pete” Arredondo was grilling in the backyard of his home on the outskirts of Uvalde. Shirtless and wearing a pair of black wraparound sunglasses, he toiled over his barbecue pit, clouds of smoke wafting into the air as an Express-News reporter called out to him from the other side of a wooden privacy fence.

Arredondo, 50, asked the reporter to “be respectful” and turned down an interview request.

Elizondo was the second Uvalde school officer to be fired. Arredondo had been the first.

As the district’s police chief on the day of the shooting, he had led a botched, slow-moving response to the school shooting, the second-worst of its kind in the nation. Widely criticized for his failure to act quickly, he was fired by the school district on Aug. 24.

A July 17 report by a Texas House investigative committee spread the blame around — to DPS, local city police and other law enforcement agencies, the school district and, of course, the shooter. It described the tragedy as a cascade of errors, the result of a “systemic failure.” But Arredondo remained the focal point of public ire throughout the summer.

The tranquil scene in his backyard — a man alone, quietly grilling meat for his dinner — belied the hellish turn his life had taken.

DPS director Steven McCraw laid the blame for the flawed response squarely on Arredondo during an electrifying news conference on May 27, just three days after the school shooting. Since then, Arredondo has been forced to give up his Uvalde city council seat, fired from his job and bombarded with interview requests. He’s been the target of at least one lawsuit and death threats.

Arredondo has been practically a ghost in this town of 15,000, rarely seen in public.

It has been a long, hard fall for Arredondo, whose arrival as the Uvalde school district’s new police chief more than two years ago was celebrated with a

Facebook statement welcoming home a native son and 1990 high school graduate.

The district's social media announcement drew warm greetings from well-wisher Gary Greenhaw saying, "Congratulations, big guy! They could not have picked a better person than Pete."

"Congrats!" wrote Rachel Gonzalez, who went to Uvalde High School. "Our kids are depending on your guidance."

'No one comes in'

As incident commander during the school shooting, Arredondo let more than an hour pass before a team of Border Patrol agents and others killed Salvador Ramos, 18, of Uvalde. The gunman fired a total of 142 rounds in classrooms 111 and 112 from a Daniel Defense DDM4 V7 rifle, slaying 19 children and two teachers.

Arredondo spent part of the time frantically searching for a key to the door behind which the shooter carried out his rampage — though the door was most likely unlocked. The school police chief called out to Ramos, trying, but failing, to engage him.

A police body-camera recording shows Arredondo directing other officers at one point, saying, "Tell them to (expletive) wait — no one comes in."

Other officers on the scene, stationed in a pair of hallways near the shooter and his victims, also failed to confront Ramos. Nearly 400 officers from numerous agencies eventually flocked to the school that day.

Area residents shake their heads, thinking of the murdered children some call babies.

"The one thing is, he should have protected all of the babies," said Estella Rios, 60, of Batesville, a town 20 miles southeast of Uvalde. "To me, they were babies."

One of the first officers to enter the school building, Arredondo has insisted he was not the incident commander that day, though his own department's guidelines for just such a situation required him to play that role. Arredondo himself wrote those guidelines.

Active-shooter training — by the Advanced Law Enforcement Rapid Response Training Center at Texas State University in San Marcos — teaches that any law enforcement officer can assume command, and that an incident commander can hand over responsibility during the shooting. But someone must be in charge.

No one took charge at Robb Elementary.

Arredondo's lawyer, in a 17-page letter read to the school board on the day of his firing, insisted that the police chief "could not have served as the incident commander and did not attempt to take that role as he was at the front line of the incident" because the crime began when Ramos shot his grandmother at her home several blocks from the school — an incident only the sheriff's office knew about.

In an interview with the Texas Tribune in early June — the only one he's granted to a news outlet — Arredondo said, "I didn't issue any orders. I called for assistance and asked for an extraction tool to open the door."

"The only thing that was important to me at this time was to save as many teachers and children as possible," he said.

Described by some as low-key, Arredondo is a polarizing figure in this small farming and ranching community.

He is also something of a cipher.

The Uvaldians who knew Arredondo and talked with the San Antonio Express-News have relationships with him loosely knitted together by intermingling histories. Some either asked not to be identified or didn't talk at all. Others carefully chose their words.

“I knew him,” City Councilman Ernest “Chip” King III said. When asked what Arredondo was like, he replied, “I prefer not to comment, but he was a nice guy.”

Uvalde County Judge Bill Mitchell was mum. “So I’m sorry, but I’m also a journalism major, OK?” he said, responding to a reporter’s questions. “So I know whenever someone says, ‘I don’t have a comment,’ that that means I don’t have a comment.”

Diana Olvedo-Karau, a community activist who’s running for Uvalde County Commissioners Court in the Nov. 8 election, thinks she knows why so many clam up when asked about Arredondo.

“Everybody knows everybody to some degree. Not everybody knows everybody intimately, but they know them or of them,” explained Olvedo-Karau, 63, a Uvalde native who spent 25 years in the Midwest before returning home four years ago. “And it doesn’t really matter whether it’s because you support him or because you don’t. Either opinion can place you in a negative light to other people.”

Uvalde is indeed a small world. She is running against incumbent Commissioner Mariano Pargas, a Uvalde police officer who is currently suspended from the force pending an investigation into his response that day.

Olvedo-Karau is one of three write-in candidates; the other two are Julio Valdez and Jacinto Casarez — whose daughter, Jackie, 9, was among the 19 students killed in the rampage.

A son of Uvalde

Arredondo did not respond to multiple interview requests. When a reporter visited his home one afternoon several weeks ago, two big pickup trucks were parked in his garage and a couple of bags of charcoal sat on his front porch.

Purchased two years ago, the one-story house is 3 minutes, 13 seconds — going the speed limit — from Robb Elementary.

Arredondo once owned a mini-storage business a few blocks from the Uvalde Police Department and had a 2005 business registration for Arredondo Enterprises. He was married when his mother, Micaela Moreno, and father, Gilberto, died roughly six weeks apart in 2014. His dad was a Uvalde native while his mother was born in Rio Bravo in the Mexican state of Coahuila. Pete Arredondo and his wife, Sofia, were living in Laredo when his parents died, according to their obituaries.

The Arredondos divorced in Laredo in 2017.

Pedro Moreno Arredondo is a son of Uvalde who eventually left the city for law enforcement jobs.

He slowly, methodically worked his way up the command ladder.

Arredondo landed at the Uvalde Police Department as a 911 dispatcher after graduating from Southwest Texas Junior College's law enforcement academy in 1993. He toiled in the department for 16 years, climbing from dispatcher to patrolman to detective to assistant chief.

His next job was in Webb County, working as a jailer in 2011 and the following year before being promoted to assistant chief of the sheriff's office. But he didn't last long as Sheriff Martin Cuellar's No. 2. Cuellar demoted him in 2014 to commander.

The sheriff said in an interview with the Express-News in August that he dropped Arredondo in rank because he "was difficult to get along with — with his coworkers, especially upper staff."

Cuellar said the Uvalde Consolidated Independent School District never called him directly to ask about Arredondo's job performance in Laredo, the Webb County seat. Cuellar said if the school district had called, he would not have recommended Arredondo for the job.

Three years later, Arredondo moved to United Independent School District in Laredo — and then back to his hometown.

People who knew him say he was friendly. As Uvalde district's top police officer, he mixed with teachers, administrators, parents and their children every school day.

Local government, including law enforcement, and the school district are major employers in Uvalde, where one in five residents live under the poverty line, according to the U.S. Census. Many residents know some police officers personally or have one or two — or maybe more — in the family.

Last spring, Arredondo parlayed his ease and familiarity with the public into success at the polls.

A man who said he knew Arredondo but would not give his name was critical of both him and the school district. But he also said Arredondo was a respected figure in the community, and pointed to his election to the City Council — two and a half weeks before the shooting — when he netted 69.2 percent of the votes in a race against three other opponents.

"Pete got the most votes, so people in town trusted him," the man said.

Ahead of the election, Arredondo told the Uvalde Leader-News that "volunteering for my community is a way of life for me."

"I have volunteered in over 30 organizations in the last 30 years. Most of those organizations have been youth based as I feel we must invest in our future," he said. "With a strong track record of public service, I know I am prepared to serve as your District 3 representative."

After his election, Arredondo told the newspaper he walked throughout his district, knocking on doors and leaving his phone number so potential constituents could call him.

"I'm very excited, I am ready to hit the ground running," he said. "I have plenty of ideas, and I definitely have plenty of drive."

All that was forgotten as soon as the gun smoke cleared at Robb Elementary.

At meeting after meeting, whether it was the City Council or the Uvalde school board, the families of victims, their friends and other supporters lined up to demand that the chief be held accountable.

They wanted him thrown off council.

Arredondo was sworn in as the council's newest member behind closed doors one week after the shooting and never attended a session as infuriated residents lined up to denounce him. He sought a leave of absence from council, which his colleagues rejected. Bowing to the pressure, he resigned his seat in early July.

The same crowds showed up at school board meetings, calling on the district to fire its police chief. The school district initially suspended him without pay and then fired him just before the start of the new school year.

Even before his dismissal, Arredondo was more a rumor than a presence around town. In interviews, residents say they didn't see him at City Hall, restaurants or the bustling H-E-B, places they might have crossed paths with a man who — tall, big and balding with a round face — wasn't easy to miss.

Mixed opinions, emotions

How Uvaldians respond when Arredondo's name comes up is often complicated.

Mayor Donald McLaughlin Jr. and Daryl Larson, an old friend of Arredondo, want him held to account. But they and others also insist he alone wasn't the only officer on the scene at fault.

Standing outside the local H-E-B, Daisy Huerta, 27, of Uvalde, put it simply: "I feel like it was a very tough situation."

Terry Bowen, 86, of Del Rio, said most people "think he was afraid." But Bowen wasn't so sure himself, explaining that he hadn't heard Arredondo's side of the story.

“Everyone said the guy is wrong, and it seems like he might be wrong, but I don’t know what his training told him to do,” he said. “I don’t know why he was acting the way he acted.”

Others note that a lot of police were at the school that day, including the Border Patrol, Texas Rangers, DPS, Uvalde Police Department SWAT team, Uvalde County sheriff’s office, U.S. Marshals and a district attorney’s office investigator. In all, 376 officers converged on the scene from 23 agencies, including 16 from San Antonio.

As the Express-News talked with people around Uvalde, the DPS revealed in early September it was investigating seven troopers for their role in the shooting response. Two of them were suspended with pay.

“In my opinion, every agency that was there that had people in the hallways needs to be reviewed — everybody,” McLaughlin said.

“There was a Texas Ranger who did not move to action, who was on the phone with his supervisors. And he did not move. He froze. They all froze,” said state Sen. Roland Gutierrez, a San Antonio Democrat who represents Uvalde. “Are you telling me that the highest-ranking member in that hallway was Pete Arredondo?”

Many of the residents who spoke with the Express-News echoed Gutierrez. But most still wanted Arredondo held accountable.

Arredondo’s old friend Larson, sitting in a pickup with his wife, Olga Cruz Morris, 59, described him as an avid hunter and fisherman. They’d known each other for 10 years or more. Larson said he helped paint Arredondo’s home in Laredo.

“He was OK. At that time, he was all right,” he said. “Since this happened, he should be feeling sorry for the children and their parents. Like he should be going to their meetings and talking to them instead of hiding out. That don’t sound like Pete, but he changed a lot, you know.”

Who was the old Pete Arredondo?

“To me, he was good. When I needed him, he was there,” said Larson, 66, of Uvalde.

Asked if Arredondo was the kind of guy he could sit and have beers with, Larson said, “Nah, I never did that stuff with Pete. I just talked to him, mowed his yard once in a while.”

Another Arredondo friend, Vince Rodriguez, said they knew each other back in school, where they shared three classes in high school.

“He’s a pretty good guy,” said Rodriguez, 45, of Uvalde.

A bit on the chubby side, Arredondo was “kind of quiet” though friendly, never in trouble and not so popular, he said. Theirs was exclusively a school friendship, one that began in a classroom but didn’t go beyond it.

A construction worker, Rodriguez didn’t recall Arredondo wanting to enter law enforcement, saying, “He was too young. He didn’t even know if he was going to go to college. He didn’t say nothing.”

The low-key Arredondo “would talk to just some groups — me and another group,” he recalled.

“I haven’t seen him around,” Rodriguez added.

McLaughlin said he interacted with Arredondo at weekly COVID meetings that included the city manager, county judge, county nurse, police chief, and representatives of the sheriff’s office and schools, but didn’t know him well.

“He seemed very professional,” the mayor said.

King, the Uvalde councilman, described Arredondo as jovial, “very courteous, very nice, very friendly with people,” adding, “I wasn’t very good friends with him by any means, but I’ve known his family.”

The Arredondos had been around town for decades.

“Oh, he had a lot of friends here in town,” said King, 56, an aviation consultant. “I can’t imagine people that didn’t know him. He comes from a family that is pretty well known.”

King sat in on a string of council sessions where Arredondo’s critics demanded his removal. He’s taken the town’s pulse and concedes most people here blame the former school police chief for not acting quickly enough to save the kids.

“That would be the most common statement, yeah,” he said.

You hear it again and again on the streets and in the parking lots of Uvalde. A father of three young daughters, oilfield worker Rene Carrizales, 32, of Uvalde, doesn’t know Arredondo and has little sympathy for him.

“It took too long to take any action to do anything,” he said. “Pretty much the whole community feels the same way. As a parent, just like, you go right in and so don’t sit there and wait.”

At D&D Barber Shop, a woman excitedly said, “Mexicans, they are mad! They are mad!”

The people she hears from want the police officers who were at the scene of the shooting fired.

“They do nothing for more than an hour, wasting time,” she said. “I’m mad, too. I don’t have kids, but still it’s hard for me.”

Vicente Reyes, 46, of Uvalde, said one of the officers at Robb Elementary should have taken leadership.

“People could have been saved, but they panicked,” he said. “No one took charge of the scene.”

Exiled in Uvalde

The school massacre tears at Uvaldians in different ways.

A man who lives across from Robb Elementary but wasn't at home at the time of the shooting said his friends talk about sports, how the kids are doing in soccer and football. They can't bring themselves to dwell on the slaughter of uncomprehending children.

"Sadly, this is a day we want to put in our past," the man, who identified himself only as "J," said as he bathed a dog on a hot, muggy afternoon.

Gary Newman, an executive who moved to Uvalde last January from Colorado, said people he knows say "maybe (Arredondo) could have made a better decision." He takes a different position himself, saying it is hard to make an informed decision without all the facts.

"There's been a lack of information for sure, but again I assume there are reasons for that," said Newman, 36.

Some, however, unequivocally condemn Arredondo. Emily Johnson, a 47-year-old mother of a Uvalde middle school student, is one of them. "He's definitely a coward," she said.

A retired soldier who didn't want to be identified, fearing retribution, said someone should have taken charge. Law enforcement officers who were on the scene, he added, should find some other line of work "now that these guys know what they're made of."

"I don't know how those guys can walk around with their heads held up," he said.

On the Uvalde CISD Facebook page that welcomed Arredondo as police chief in 2020, the comments of praise from Joey Medellin of Laredo and others were crowded out by anger and vitriol in the hours and days after the shooting.

"Hope you are fired and never allowed to wear a badge again," wrote Chris Seidler. "You have no business in law enforcement. You are a disgrace to your community."

Arredondo's future in Uvalde appears bleak.

The mayor thinks he'll have to leave town if he wants to start over.

"Whether he will or not, I don't know. That'll be his decision. But I would think it'll be hard for him in Uvalde — just the pressure of people and the families and so forth," McLaughlin said. "I would think to make a living he'll probably have to move on beyond here, and I would probably bet it's not going to be in law enforcement, either."

For his part, Arredondo, in the letter written by his lawyer shortly before his dismissal as police chief, didn't take responsibility for the ill-fated police response to the shooting but appeared to acknowledge the foul mood of his hometown.

"Tuesday, May 24, 2022, will be a day of sorrow, for Chief Arredondo, and all the others impacted by this horrible event," the letter said. "All those impacted are in one or more stages of grief, from shock to denial, to anger, to bargaining, to depression, to acceptance and hope, to processing the grief. The grieving process will take time, and with time, we all hope to find understanding. Those fighting with anger lash out, trying to find a means to move on, and with anger, comes the blame game."

Uvalde school superintendent says he'll retire — timeline to be decided

[Claire Bryan](#), Staff writer

Oct. 10, 2022Updated: Oct. 10, 2022 8:27 p.m.

UVALDE — The embattled Uvalde school superintendent, Hal Harrell, made his retirement plans public Monday, and his board wished him well and voted to hire the San Antonio-based Walsh Gallegos law firm to conduct a search for his replacement.

No departure date was set. A group of Harrell's supporters came out to thank him but stayed outside the small meeting room, which was filled with his detractors.

That crowd, which included parents of children killed at the May 24 mass shooting at Robb Elementary School, applauded Harrell's decision to retire. Some had called earlier for his firing. Some said they had been willing to work with him and didn't want to be blamed for his departure.

Days earlier, the district had suspended operations of its police force and placed a lieutenant and a top school official on paid leave. The shake-up came after public outrage about the district's hiring of a former Texas Department of Public Safety trooper whose performance was under investigation by the state agency.

Harrell has navigated the tumultuous aftermath of a massacre that left 19 children and two teachers dead. He moved to fire the district's police chief but took months to do it, a pace harshly criticized as too slow, then restarted classes last month amid incomplete work to build fences and install security infrastructure.

Through it all, he was supported by a unanimous board, but voices of support from the public at its meetings were rare.

"Hal reached this decision to retire on his own and I respect that," said Kimberly Rubio, who lost her daughter Lexi in the shooting, during public comments at Monday's meeting.

But Rubio said Harrell's supporters outside had only showed up "now when a job is at stake" and had "stayed home when families had been defending transparency and accountability."

"How dare you attack those of us who lost our children in the worst way possible?" she said. "Go home and hug your kids and be glad you can, because I'll be at the cemetery. Because that is the closest I can get to my baby."

Harrell spoke briefly before the meeting with the group of supporters, calling the moment “overwhelming,” and asking them to pray for the families of the shooting’s victims.

“My heart goes out to each and every one of you, and all the families. I pray for them daily,” he said.

One in the crowd, Tom Brewer, said he had known Harrell all his life.

“He is behind our students. He does what is best for our schools,” Brewer said.

“If we go outside our community to try to get a new administration in here, it is not going to be good,” he said. “I promise you Hal knows every single person on this street. He knows their parents, their grandchildren, and he knows their children. We need someone like that to be our next leader in our schools. And I really wish he would not retire, to tell you the truth.”

In a post that morning on his wife’s Facebook page, Harrell said he planned to stay in office “throughout the year” until a new superintendent can be named.

“My decision to retire has not been made lightly and was made after much prayer and discernment,” he wrote. “My wife and I love you all and this community that we both grew up in, therefore this decision was a difficult one for us.”

“I have been blessed to work among amazing educators and staff who believe in education for more than 30 years, which have all been in our beautiful community,” Harrell wrote. “These next steps for our future are being taken after much reflection, and is completely my choice.”

The time it takes to find a replacement will depend on how far-reaching a search the board will decide to conduct. But there’ll be no shortage of candidates, said James Guerra, CEO of Austin-based JG Consulting.

“They need a healer right now,” Guerra said. “They need someone who has the experience, the skill set to manage a very complex situation. ... For the right individual, this job could be very appealing.”

Speaking hours before the board met, he said his firm had no contact with Uvalde CISD but would offer to do the search for free if the district formally sought proposals. Whoever does the search will be under “a bright spotlight,” Guerra said.

The community has reacted on social media to Harrell’s announcement with both continued anger and some praise for how he has led the district over the long, hot summer.

The slow, halting nature of the district’s process of holding people accountable for their handling of school security before and during the shooting grated on his hardest critics. In particular, Harrell was under constant public pressure, which erupted regularly at monthly board meetings and special forums, to fire the chief of campus police, Pete Arredondo.

Arredondo was identified early as the on-scene commander of a multiagency law enforcement fiasco in which about 400 officers at Robb failed to confront the 18-year-old gunman for 77 minutes before Border Patrol agents stormed a classroom and killed him.

The chief denied being in charge. A twice-delayed board vote to fire him didn’t happen until August. By then, Harrell also had suspended the principal of Robb Elementary after a Texas House report accused the district of routine laxity in its safety preparations. He reinstated her in a different job days later, when she disputed the report.

Harrell simultaneously presided over the district’s preparations for a new school year, a busy period under normal circumstances made more complex by the need to assure parents the campuses would be secure — a near impossibility with Arredondo still being paid.

The work got done, though, including legal arrangements for a series of sizable donations from corporations, nonprofits, sports teams and philanthropists across the country and the shifting of students from the abandoned Robb Elementary to other campuses. The district created a temporary school for Robb’s returning third- and fourth-graders in another building and called it Uvalde Elementary.

New fencing was still being built as school started Sept. 6, with a sizable presence of DPS troopers and some new officers added to the school district's police department. Barely noticed at the time, the new officers included Crimson Hux Elizondo, who was one of the first DPS troopers to arrive at Robb and had been suspended by the agency as it investigated her actions that day.

She was swiftly fired last week after news arrived that the district had given her a job while knowing the DPS had suspended her. She can be heard on publicly released body camera video telling other officers in the hallway at Robb on May 24 that her response to the shooter would have been more aggressive if her son had been in the classroom.

The resulting disbelief and anger drew a fresh crowd of support to a small sit-in protest outside the district's central office that was by then in its second week. Harrell had resisted the protesters' demands that he suspend all five campus police officers who had been at Robb with Arredondo.

But on Friday, the protest organizers achieved their goals and more. Harrell suspended the whole department, assigned all of its officers to other jobs and placed its interim chief on paid administrative leave, along with another department head, the director of student services, who decided to retire. The announcement of that move implied that he held the two officials responsible for hiring Elizondo.

Within hours, Harrell also sent a note to school staff to tell them he would discuss his own retirement with the board on Monday.

The superintendent since 2018, Harrell started working at the district in 1992 as a special education teacher. He worked his way up over the years, serving as assistant principal and then principal at Uvalde High School, director of student services and deputy superintendent.

Division on display as Uvalde school district prepares to look for next superintendent

[Claire Bryan](#), Staff writer

Oct. 11, 2022Updated: Oct. 13, 2022 9:23 a.m.

UVALDE — Nearly 100 supporters of Hal Harrell, the Uvalde schools superintendent, erupted in cheers when he arrived for a board meeting that would decide how to replace him.

They hugged him and started chanting, “Harrell! Harrell! Harrell!” Most, but not all, were white.

Inside, the boardroom was starkly somber. Parents whose children died in one of the country’s deadliest school shootings sat quietly in black T-shirts with white lettering that read: “21 unheard voices had their lives robbed so we’re not done.” On the back was “4ever in the 4th grade.” Many, but not all, were Hispanic.

Hours before Uvalde Consolidated Independent School District trustees voted late Monday to hire the San Antonio-based Walsh Gallegos law firm to conduct a search for a new superintendent, Harrell’s decision to retire had placed a community divide on bright display.

One reason it had been concealed so long was one side’s reluctance to be public about it.

“Thank you Dr. Harrell! We stand with you, and we are sick of the ‘blame game,’ the bias media... fear... politics... lawsuits... hate,” one of Harrell’s supporter’s signs read.

“Uvalde United not divided,” read another.

Tensions were high. The room could hold only 90 people. Many who had waited to greet Harrell had to stay outside, watching a livestream on their phones. State troopers patrolled the area and enforced the capacity limit at the door.

The superintendent's decision to retire came after he made a series of high-profile personnel changes late last week. He fired a new police officer, Crimson Hux Elizondo, then sidelined the entire district police force and suspended its chief and another official after reports that the district had hired Elizondo while the Texas Department of Public Safety investigated her actions at Robb Elementary School as one of the first state troopers to arrive at the shooting scene.

It seemed to culminate the months of public pressure to hold people accountable for failing to protect 19 children and two teachers in the shooting. With Harrell's decision widely seen as a response to that pressure, the two groups at Monday's board meeting faulted each other for either pushing that effort too unrelentingly — or failing to join it.

"Half the town is here for one man!" a woman shouted at the sight of Harrell's supporters.

"Exactly!" a woman in the Harrell camp shouted back.

"And who is here for our children? Nobody," the first woman replied, backed by another who yelled, "Shame on all of y'all! Shame!"

Many supporters of Harrell declined to be interviewed. Some predicted that anything they said would be criticized by the grieving families and further divide the town. Others said they refused to talk to news media they perceived as fueling the city's ongoing turmoil. One blamed journalists for "ruining our town."

"Twenty-one brutally murdered teachers and students wasn't enough to outrage our Uvalde Strong community, but your retirement is — you are very blessed, Dr. Harrell," Berlinda Arreola said during public comments.

But Arreola, who lost her 10-year-old granddaughter Amerie Jo Garza in the shooting, was one of several activists who stressed that they, too, supported the superintendent and had not asked for him to step down.

“I hope and pray we find a superintendent qualified enough to fill your shoes,” she told Harrell.

Though he has been one of the superintendent’s sharpest critics, Brett Cross, who lost Uziyah Garcia, 10, a nephew he had raised like a son, asked Harrell for help in reaching across the divide.

“If it had been 17 white kids, all of those people out there would’ve been in here,” Cross said of Harrell’s supporters. “All of our kids matter. They all matter. Sir, I need your help, you know, reaching them, because they don’t ever come in here.”

Outside, Tom Brewer said he had known Harrell all his life, applauded what he had accomplished and doubted the district would find anyone as in touch with local families if it took its search for a new superintendent outside Uvalde.

“I think that the people need to just be behind our administration and support them in what they choose to do,” Brewer said. “Our town isn’t going to be able to heal until we put this school business to rest. How to do it, I have no idea.”

A previous version of this story incorrectly described the location of the woman who said, “Half the town is here for one man!” She was outside the boardroom.

Uvalde shooting spawned a lot of activism — then it splintered

[Claire Bryan](#), Staff writer

Oct. 17, 2022Updated: Oct. 17, 2022 12:48 p.m.

UVALDE — It wasn't until midnight, once everyone had gone home, that Brett Cross could begin his nightly routine — collapsing lawn chairs, stashing food in coolers, taking photos of his camp outside the Uvalde Consolidated Independent School District's administration building.

And doing the math — counting up the hours he had protested so he could send one last tweet before falling asleep on his cot.

Back in his own bed after the 11-day sit-in — which ended Oct. 7 when the UCISD superintendent sidelined the school district's police force and the protesters declared victory — Cross still doesn't sleep well.

That can also be a problem for the other parents of the 19 children and two teachers who were shot to death May 24 at Robb Elementary School.

Especially at night, their minds race with questions. Why didn't the school lock the doors? Why did it take 77 minutes for almost 400 law enforcement officers to stop the carnage? Why has it taken so long for school leaders to take responsibility?

In their waking hours, all through Uvalde's hot, dry summer, they and other residents channeled their anger and frustration into political action. They yelled at the school board and city council, advocated for gun control measures across the state and in Washington D.C., backed candidates, demanded change.

Many have hitched their anger to a deep-seated sense of injustice. Parents turned activists have been trying to revive a generations-old argument about Uvalde's racial and economic disparities, which they see cemented in place by an essentially conservative local power structure.

But the homegrown organizations they created have splintered and multiplied. They differ in tactics, tone and tenacity, though there's considerable overlap among them. It's hard to know if a majority of Uvalde residents are ready to back them, despite universal horror at the massacre and sympathy for the affected families.

What the grief-stricken parents and those who support their activism mostly agree on is that even concrete achievements won't mean much without a bigger transformation.

"I'm afraid we're going to do all the right things, provide money, provide counseling, we'll build a new school, maybe a rec center — and nothing will change. If nothing changes, we have lost our humanity once again. We can't afford that. It is too hard to get back," the Rev. Michael Marsh, the rector at St. Philip's Episcopal Church in Uvalde, told visiting U.S. House members in September.

Something needs to be done about gun legislation, about poverty and racism and bullying, Marsh said, adding, "If we don't put back the future in a new way, we will always be imprisoned by the past."

Cross staked his 24-hour-a-day protest at the school district office to a highly specific demand — the suspension of school police officers until their actions on May 24 can be investigated — but he also thinks in terms of wider, citywide impact.

"These people in power for so long have just gotten comfortable not being told no, doing whatever the hell they want without repercussions," Cross said a week into his sit-in. "That must change. We need people who are representative of our community."

The public pressure on school district leaders began within days of the shooting and the activism quickly coalesced around the Fierce Madres, mothers focused on kid safety, and Uvalde Strong for Gun Safety, which called for changes in firearms laws.

By the time Uvalde CISD students walked into their first day of classes Sept. 6, there were two others: K.A.R.M.A., which stands for Keep All Righteous Minds Aware and raises money to support families in need, and Lives Robbed, formed by four of the families who lost children May 24.

The Uvalde Strong group on Wednesday changed its name to Uvalde Strong for Child Safety.

Activists acknowledge that more media attention — and the beginnings of a local backlash — has gone to the bluntest and loudest among them. They mean Cross, one of the founders of Lives Robbed, whose proficiency with social media gave his real-time arguments with school officials a nationwide audience.

A fifth group, Justice for Uvalde, was created last month by a veteran activist who helped organize local farm workers decades ago. He hopes to unite all the other groups.

That might not be easy.

Unity elusive

At the beginning, “there was this real good energy, and it was like, ‘Wow, we are strong, they are hearing us,’” said Diana Olvedo-Karau, a write-in candidate for Uvalde County commissioner. “But slowly and surely that has really changed. The momentum has been lost. The groups are beginning to fragment. And we are losing that window of opportunity.”

Big personalities and strong emotions have led the groups’ leaders to go their own ways, she said, adding, “It’s kind of sad because we don’t need the so-called enemy to defeat us, we do a pretty good job of that ourselves.”

Virtually all the activists want the Legislature to raise the age limit for purchasing assault rifles from 18 to 21, and some have appeared with Democratic gubernatorial candidate Beto O’Rourke to press the issue. The high school dropout who killed their kids had just turned 18 when he purchased his weapon.

Early in the summer, Uvalde’s school board and city council unanimously passed resolutions calling for the age limit. The activists also convinced city council members in Hondo, one county to the east, to revoke a rental agreement with a National Rifle Association affiliate, scuttling a planned fundraiser after a heated debate.

The school district heard out the activists without much direct response to them. UCISD Superintendent Hal Harrell spent the summer acknowledging the loss of trust, reorganizing schools and embarking on security upgrades that include

fences, cameras and vestibule entrances, which were incomplete by the first day of school.

At his recommendation, the school board fired its police chief, Pete Arredondo, after weeks of the activists' demanding it and expressing fury at the lengthy negotiations with his lawyer delaying the vote.

Harrell's announcement last week that he would retire was seen by some as a capitulation to Cross and a validation of his sit-in tactic.

But the district was careful to say Harrell's shakeup of the UCISD police department stemmed from a blunder — it had hired a state trooper suspended and under investigation by the Texas Department of Public Safety for her performance at Robb during the shooting.

Before the school board voted Oct. 10 to hire a law firm to search for a new superintendent, hundreds of residents cheered Harrell outside the meeting. The regular activist contingent spoke during the public comment period inside, including Cross, who went out on a limb and asked Harrell for help reaching "all of those people out there."

Interviewed a few days later, Cross wasn't sure such a bridge could be built. Neither were other activists.

"I can talk to these people one-on-one ... a lot of them want to be decent," said Adam Martinez, the founder of K.A.R.M.A. "I would be open to discussing with them, but I just wouldn't want Harrell to be part of it. I don't want him to get any credit."

Among those who doubt an alliance with Harrell's supporters is in the cards is Abelardo "Lalo" Castillo, 76, who helped lead a walkout in 1970 by hundreds of students at Robb Elementary to protest unequal treatment of Mexican Americans in the public schools.

Back then, the town's Anglo residents were almost entirely against the movement, "and so were a lot of Mexican Americans," he said.

There's no particular animosity among the current activists, but they're younger parents, with their own agendas, and everyone is new to this kind of work, Castillo said, so he created Justice for Uvalde to try to bring them together.

"That is the main reason that there are so many groups," he said. "There are so many intelligent people involved. But there is no central organization."

Some of the activist leaders question if they can ever unite. Angela Villescaz, the founder of Fierce Madres, doubted it as early as July but held out hope. Months later, she found herself getting edged out by other groups, particularly Lives Robbed, due to "personality differences," she said.

"I don't know what it is. They don't like my organization," Villescaz said. "It's terribly heartbreaking. We were the fiercest fighters encouraging them."

She's determined not to let the division deter her and has focused her group on state and county-level elections.

"We aren't even grasping at the same turf," Villescaz said. "I'm doing work all over Texas."

Reaction, exhaustion

Eight days into Brett Cross' sit-in, CNN reported that the district in August had hired a Texas Department of Public Safety trooper, Crimson Elizondo, who was at Robb on May 24. She can be heard on body camera video telling other officers outside the classroom where the gunman was holed up, "If my son had been in there, I would not have been outside. I promise you that."

Within days, the school district put its police officers on other jobs until a private firm it had hired could complete its investigation of how they performed at Robb. Cross thinks his protest can claim part of the credit, but only in combination with CNN's reporting.

"I would've still been out there had that story not dropped," he said.

Instead, the news about Elizondo prompted outraged and reinvigorated activists to flock to his campsite. He was usually alone or with just a handful of supporters, but 30 people were there at 6:30 a.m. the next morning, and the crowd grew, with signs reading, “Families deserve the truth,” “If you did not do your job give up your badge,” and giant photos of Robb victims.

A man driving a truck down North Getty Street honked and screamed, “Move on!” at them. The sentiment wasn’t new for the activists.

“If someone cannot work within the order of society, they should be rejected,” Kenneth R. Dirksen, a local business owner and deacon at Sacred Heart Catholic Church, wrote in [a letter to the editor of the Uvalde Leader-News](#). “If they think the laws and ordinances of our city are unjust, they should work within the processes to change them. Causing disruptions to get attention is immature and unproductive.”

In a town of just 16,000 people, the activists hear something like this most places they go. Several have come to assume that most of Uvalde’s white residents, at least those comfortably well off, hope that the parents will simply grieve quietly.

Nikki Cross, Brett Cross’s wife, recalled a woman coming up to her in H-E-B and yelling “that I was just trying to cause a divide in her community.”

And yet, sometimes the attention comes in the form of random generosity. At a convenience store this month, a man approached her as she was about to pay for gas, asked, “You’re Nikki?” and, before she could reply, paid with his debit card and walked away.

“And I was just like, ‘Um, thank you,’” Nikki Cross recalled.

Putting themselves in a small town’s spotlight is the tactic they chose to change the town, but it’s stressful.

“I’m so afraid of everyone just forgetting and moving on,” she said through tears midway through her husband’s sit-in. “This community deserves the transparency. And we deserve to stop having our names run through the ground. We have never been violent.”

‘On the front stage’

Castillo and some local historians believe Uvalde’s power structure has not changed substantially since the turmoil of 1970, though more Hispanics occupy local elected offices.

“I’m always asked, ‘What’s the difference between then and now?’ And the only difference, to be honest with you, is the color. The color has changed. We’ve got white and we’ve got brown, but the system is still the same,” Castillo said.

Martinez, of K.A.R.M.A., said many townsfolk agree.

“I’ll ask people, ‘Do you think anything is going to change?’ And people will say, ‘No, it has always been like that, it always will,” he said “That is what pushes me to try to keep going and change it.”

“It might be our only opportunity,” Martinez said. “We are on the front stage where everyone can see.”

Nobody has worked the stage more astutely than Brett Cross.

People stopped by his parking lot protest to drop off lunch, artwork, signs, fans, games. There was a shared humor about how badly everyone was doing. Two parents might be joking around a few feet from two others breaking down in tears — nobody thought it strange.

Before May 24, Brett and Nikki Cross and their seven children were not very involved in the community, having moved here four years ago to be closer to Brett Cross’s work in the West Texas wind energy industry.

They said they joined three other sets of bereaved parents — including Javier Cazares, who lost his daughter, Jacklyn, 9, at Robb and is now a write-in candidate for county commissioner — to create the non-profit Lives Robbed because they worried about the permanence of the other groups.

“Something we’ve learned is that everyone is here and pretty active in the first few months after this takes place, but naturally people go on with their lives,” Brett Cross said. “We will not be going anywhere.”

Before the school district announced it had fired Elizondo, the former DPS trooper, the suddenly growing crowd at the campsite talked about how parents had often described police officers who waited in the hallway at Robb Elementary as not caring about their kids. The body camera footage of Elizondo made it real, they said.

A couple of Fierce Madres dropped by. So did some members of K.A.R.M.A.

“I think that got everyone so mad they just decided, ‘We got to go out there,’ said Jesse Rizo, the uncle of Jacklyn Cazares. “I don’t know how long it will last, but I’m hoping that (the groups) are going to unite, or at least communicate with each other now.”